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Blue Butterflies

New addition to Niagara
Parks Butterfly Conservatory.
Page 3

Extra protection

EMS taking precautions.
Page 8

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HEART AND STROKE

FAST action saves teen

MARYANNE FIRTH
QMI Agency Niagara

The curve of his smile isn't quite as deep on the left side of his mouth.

His gait isn't quite as smooth. But his determination is as strong as ever.

Ben Fox has his sights set on a return to the ice — back to the place where his life changed on Aug. 5.

It all happened during the first hockey practice of the season when the 15-year-old defenceman with the Southern Tier Admirals was running drills at Vale Health and Wellness Centre in Port Colborne.

"I remember skating, getting a migraine and then collapsing," Ben, a Pelham resident, recalls. It's one of the few memories he has from what has since proven to be a

significant day.

Assistant coach Craig McPhee saw the star player hit the ice on the other end of the rink and watched momentarily, expecting the teen to return to his feet.

Instead, Ben struggled. "He was lying there, trying to get up, but he couldn't," Craig says of the team's assistant captain, who had ambitions to become an Ontario Hockey League draft pick.

"Ben is one of our strongest players. He's a horse. I thought maybe he took a shot in the ankle, something pulled him down."

Realizing something wasn't right, the coaching staff rushed over in confusion.

What they found was Fox mumbling about his skate, seemingly disoriented.

They began asking him sim-

ple questions — Did he know his name? Where he was?

"He was trying to answer but was noticeably having problems. He kept stuttering," Craig explains.

That's when the assistant coach laid down on the ice, face to face with his player, only to find one of the teen's pupils fully dilated and his left side lax.

It was that moment that prompted a call to 911.

While Craig suspected what had happened, it wasn't until paramedics pulled off Ben's left glove, exposing his semi-clenched hand, that he was sure.

The young, aspiring hockey player had just suffered a stroke.

They were signs Craig had sadly seen before.

See FOX on Page 2



MARYANNE FIRTH/QMI AGENCY NIAGARA

Fifteen-year-old Ben Fox has been working hard on his recovery after suffering a stroke during hockey practice on Aug. 5.

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UPFRONT

■ FOX

Young hockey player suffered stroke

From Page 1

His youngest son suffered a stroke in utero four years earlier.

"(Grady's) hand was identical to Ben's," he says, calling it "surreal" to again see the symptoms in a child.

"I knew what had just happened. I knew how much had just changed for him in the blink of an eye."

Ben was rushed to hospital in Niagara Falls before being transferred to McMaster Children's Hospital. There it was learned the stroke, affecting the left side of his body, was caused by a carotid artery dissection—a separation of the layers of the artery wall supplying oxygen-bearing blood to the head and brain.

"It was a fluke that it happened," mother Jodi says of the rare occurrence.

Doctors told the Fox family it was more likely Ben would be hit by lightning than suffer a stroke in such a manner.

When the swelling in the young man's brain did not immediately subside, he had to undergo surgery to remove a portion of his skull to relieve the pressure.

"It was the longest couple of hours of my life," Jodi says.

"It was devastating. It was a matter of life or death at that point."

When Ben awoke in the hospital with little knowledge of what had happened, the news was difficult to take.

But rather than dwell on the setback, he challenged himself to improve—and quickly.

On Sept. 4 he was transferred from McMaster to Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto, where he receives physical and occupational therapy three to five times a week.

He progressed at an impressive rate, leaving his doctors in awe as he left behind his wheelchair and learned to walk again after only a few weeks.

Though first relying on a walker and then a cane, Ben is now able to walk without assistance.

Taking those first few steps



MARYANNE FRITH/QUI Agency Niagara

Fifteen-year-old Ben Fox, centre, chats with mom Jodi and assistant hockey coach Craig McPhee in the Fox family's Pelham home. Fox is recovering after suffering a stroke during hockey practice on Aug. 5.

for the second time in his life was a rewarding experience for the Grade 10 E.L. Crossley student.

Ben's focus was initially on getting his leg functioning again, but now, with his 16th birthday and prospect of getting his driver's licence nearing on Jan. 6, his attention has turned to his arm.

"My arm recently got a lot of movement," he says, looking down with a slight smile.

The feeling has begun to return to his hand as well, though movement at this point is still minimal.

Hoping to quicken his progress, Ben is doubling up on therapy throughout December, going twice a day

in an effort to further improve before returning to high school in the new year.

"It's hard to put into words. I can't believe the strength he's got," Jodi says of her son.

"He found it in there somewhere. To be able to progress so quickly, we're so proud of him."

But none of that would be possible, she says, without the quick action of coaching staff who helped to minimize the damage Ben incurred during his stroke.

"He wouldn't be here if not for them, not in this capacity," Jodi says.

"It was a bad situation, but it could've been a lot worse." To help raise awareness

of the signs of stroke and encourage quick action similar to that seen in Ben's case, the Heart and Stroke Foundation recently launched a new national campaign, FAST.

The acronym stands for Face, is it drooping? Arms, can you raise both? Speech, is it slurred or jumbled? and Time to call 911.

The campaign's slogan: Act fast because the quicker you act, the more of the person you save.

"FAST. All those things were in play," Craig says of the moment when Ben was being assessed.

"They helped us recognize something was happening." That fast action led to Ben

receiving a clot-busting drug within two hours, which can help erase the effects of ischemic stroke and lead to a fuller recovery if received shortly after the onset of symptoms.

Ben is confident he will continue to improve and he's hopeful he'll someday make his triumphant return to the sport he's loved dearly since the age of three.

Two weeks ago, he was able to set foot on the ice for the first time since the stroke.

He admits it was "overwhelming but frustrating at the same time" to be back but without the freedom to move like he once could.

Though he doesn't strap on

his skates, Ben tries to make every Admirals game he can to show his support to his teammates, who stood by his family through the difficult time.

Instead of getting "mad at the world," Jodi says her son has taken each challenge in stride.

"He never complains," she says.

"Never says 'Why me?' He's been incredible. Very mature."

Ben was scheduled to be discharged from hospital last Friday, just in time to spend the holidays at home with his family.

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LOCAL NEWS

■ BUTTERFLY CONSERVATORY: Blue Morpho exhibit returns for second year

A blue Christmas on wings

ALISON LANGLEY
QMI Agency Niagara

It's a true blue Christmas at Niagara Parks Butterfly Conservatory.

More than 500 vibrant Blue Morpho butterflies have been added to the 2,000 butterflies at the indoor rainforest as part of a special holiday exhibit.

This is the second year the conservatory has hosted the Blue Morpho event.

"We wanted to showcase one of our visitors' most favourite butterflies," said curator Cheryl Tyndall.

"Blue Morphos are beautiful. They are very large butterflies and the blue iridescent colours on the wings are just stunning."

There are normally between 100 and 200 Blue Morphos at the conservatory.

There are now an additional 500 butterflies on display and another batch will soon emerge from their pupae and prepare for flight.

In the coming days, there could be up to 1,000 bright blue butterflies fluttering about. Blue Morphos are native to South and Central America and have a wingspan of 9.5 to 12 centimetres.

"They are known as 'dusk to dawn' butterflies as the males are active early in the morning and later in the day.

"The males will congregate together and chase each other through the conservatory," Tyndall said. "It's almost like a dance and it's quite fun to watch."

BLUE MORPHO EXHIBIT

Niagara Parks Butterfly Conservatory
On now until Jan. 4
www.niagaraparks.com

The dance is actually a show of bravado from males eager to protect their territory and attract a female's attention.

The butterflies aren't shy, and visitors shouldn't be surprised if one lands on their head or shoulders.

Tyndall recommends wearing clothes with the colour blue for a truly interactive experience.

"If the males see blue, they'll come down to it because they'll think you're another male in their territory or they'll think you're a female and they'll come down to get a closer look."

The exhibit continues until Jan. 4. Tyndall said the conservatory is a great place to escape the chilly weather and walk among the colourful creatures.

"Now is an excellent time to come," she said.

Visit www.niagaraparks.com for more information.

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PHOTOS BY WIRE DBATISTIA/QMI AGENCY NIAGARA

Hundreds of Blue Morpho butterfly pupae are set to hatch over the next few days, bringing the total at the Butterfly Conservatory to more than 1,000.

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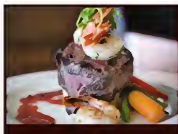


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The Niagara Parks Butterfly Conservatory brings a whole new meaning to Blue Christmas with the return of its holiday Blue Morpho butterfly exhibit, running until Jan. 4.

INPORT NEWS

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Shipwrecks — Hudson Transport

SKIPP GILLHAM
For QMI Agency/Niagara

Fire broke out aboard the Canadian tanker *Hudson Transport* on Christmas Day 1961.

The ship was about 320 kilometres east of Quebec City on a voyage from Montreal to the Magdalen Islands with 40,000 barrels of Bunker C oil.

The accommodation area on the stem of the vessel was destroyed and seven members of the crew died in the blaze. The ship was towed to Sept-les to be unloaded and then to Sorel.

The loss was listed at \$4 million and the gutted ship was eventually sold to Marine Salvage of Port Colborne for scrap and arrived there, under tow, on May 28, 1965. But, instead of dismantling the hull, it was resold and converted to a tanker barge named *Scurry* and returned to service as such in 1967.

After limited service on the Great Lakes, the ship was laid up at Sarnia only to gain another reprieve. It was sold again, this time to Nigerian interests, and taken to Lagos for new work under the name *Rena* in 1992. It may still be in service near that West African country.

■ I'VE BEEN THINKING

A Christmas parable

PASTOR JEEVA SAM

Forbes Road East and Morgan's Point United Churches

There was once a man who didn't believe in God and he didn't hesitate to let others know how he felt about religion and religious holidays, such as Christmas. His wife, however, did believe, and she raised their children to also have faith in God and Jesus, despite his disparaging comments. One snowy Christmas Eve, his wife was taking the children to a Christmas Eve service in the farm community in which they lived. She asked him to come, but he refused.

"That story is nonsense!" he said. "Why would God lower himself to come to earth as a man? That's ridiculous!"

So she and the children left and he stayed home.

A while later, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. As the man looked out the window, all he saw was a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to rest before the fire for the evening. Then he heard a loud thump. Something hit the window. Then another thump. He looked out, but couldn't see more than a few feet.

When the snow let up a little, he ventured outside to see what could have been beating on his window. In the field near his house he saw a flock of wild geese. Apparently they had

been flying south for the winter when they got caught in the snowstorm and couldn't go on. They were lost and stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter. They just flapped their wings and flew around the field in wild circles, blindly, aimlessly. A couple of them had flown into his window, it seemed.

The man felt sorry for the geese and wanted to help them. The barn would be a great place for them to stay, he thought. It's warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm. So he walked over to the barn and opened the doors wide, then watched and waited, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. But the geese just fluttered around aimlessly and didn't seem to notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them.

The man tried to get their attention, but that just seemed to scare them and they moved further away. He went into the house and came with some bread, broke it up and made a bread crumb trail leading to the barn. The birds didn't catch on. Now he was getting frustrated. He got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn. Nothing he could get them to go into the barn, where they would be warm and safe.

"Why don't they follow me?" he exclaimed. "Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?" He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't

follow a human. "If only I were a goose, then I could save them," he said out loud.

Then he had an idea. He went into the barn, got one of his own geese, and carried it to his arms as he circled around the flock of wild geese. Then he raised it. His goose flew through the flock and straight into the barn — and one by one the other geese followed it to safety.

He stood silently for a moment as the words he had spoken a few minutes earlier replayed in his mind: "If only I were a goose, then I could save them." Then he thought about what he had said to his wife earlier. "Why would God want to be like us? That's ridiculous!"

Suddenly it all made sense. That is what God had done. We were like the geese — blind, lost, perishing. God had His Son become like us so He could show us the way and save us. That was the meaning of Christmas, he realized.

As the winds and blinding snow died down, his soul became quiet and pondered this wonderful thought. He understood what Christmas was all about, why Christ had come. Years of doubt and disbelief vanished like the passing storm.

He fell on his knees in the snow and prayed his first prayer: "Thank You, God, for coming in human form to get me out of the storm."

pastor@mvrgs.org | pointunited.com

No reason not to have U.S.-Cuba relations

The U.S. government's plan to normalize relations with Cuba is long overdue, especially since the Americans have had an immense economic relationship with Communist China for many years, even extending the olive branch to the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, if only for a moment.

Yet, for more than 50 years, Cuba has been frozen out of American diplomatic and economic circles, despite the fact the Caribbean nation hasn't posed a significant military threat to the U.S. for a generation. Americans haven't been allowed to travel freely to the island since the early 1960s, and the U.S. has had a trade embargo over the same span of time.

The sanctions and embargo extend back to the early years of Cuban revolutionary

Fidel Castro, who quickly aligned his new socialist government with the Soviets, accelerating tensions during the Cold War and prompting an American-led covert military excursion into Cuba in 1961 that proved to be disastrous. In October 1962, the Soviets were found to be moving missiles onto Cuba, and the world came within a whisker of nuclear war.

But that's history, and the Americans are wise to move on. They certainly have with the Chinese, showing little regret in trading with a nation governed by a communist regime that routinely flouts freedoms and human rights that Americans (and Canadians) enjoy.

Normalizing relations with Cuba, therefore, should be obvious. On Wednesday, both the U.S. and Cuba said they would begin talks toward that goal. The U.S. wants

to open an embassy and reopen trade.

Up until now, the challenge has always been political. There is a large Cuban community in Florida that continues to hate Castro and his brother, who succeeded him in 2008.

Cuba has suffered economically because of the U.S. embargo. Indeed, in past years it was ironically forced to strengthen its economic ties with the Soviets.

Even more ironic, President Richard Nixon in 1972 travelled to Moscow to engage in formal talks with the communist brass, to seek agreement on several issues, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

But no such conciliation has ever been offered to Cuba, until now.

— Peter Epp



REUTERS FILES

U.S. President Barack Obama, left, greets Cuba's President Raul Castro before giving his speech at the memorial service for late South African President Nelson Mandela last December. The U.S. and Cuba agreed on Wednesday to restore diplomatic ties that Washington severed more than 50 years ago.

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LOCAL NEWS

■ **ANIMALS:** Aptly named Trooper on the mend after major surgery

Cat with untreated injury has leg amputated

ROB HOULE
QMI Agency Niagara

Trooper is going to get a second chance.

Responding to a complaint of animal cruelty last Monday night in Thorold, Lincoln County Humane Society discovered a cat with a leg injury that had not been treated.

Humane society executive director Kevin Strooband said the one- to two-year-old orange tabby was surrendered to the animal welfare agency and immediately transported to an emergency clinic, where it was decided the cat required surgery to amputate its right

rear leg.

"It's not a case where we could have waited to go to the vet that the humane society normally uses, in the morning. It was, no, we have to do this right now," Strooband said, noting the surgery was performed at approximately 10 p.m.

Strooband said the humane society spent more than \$1,000 for the procedure and expects to spend more to maintain the health of the cat, which staff have named Trooper.

"We felt this surgery was the best choice for this kind cat, who deserves to be cared

for in a loving home," Strooband said.

Since Trooper was surrendered to the humane society, he now belongs to it and will be adopted once he recovers at a foster home.

Because the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is investigating, Strooband could not discuss the specifics of how the humane society became aware of Trooper's plight or the extent of the leg injury, other than to say it required amputation.

Strooband said Trooper's prognosis for recovery is "guarded" but very good.



JULIE JOCSAM/QMI AGENCY NIAGARA

"Trooper," as he has been named by the staff at the Lincoln County Humane Society, is recuperating after having his right hind leg amputated. The cat was rescued by the LCHS and an investigation is underway.

Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

from our family to yours.



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LOCAL NEWS

HOLIDAY WASTE MANAGEMENT SERVICES



HOLIDAY CHANGES IN WASTE COLLECTION

Garbage, recycling and Green Bin collection will be deferred by one day in the week following Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Regular Waste Collection Day	Changed to:
Monday, Dec. 22	No change
Tuesday, Dec. 23	No change
Wednesday, Dec. 24	No change
Thursday, Dec. 25	Friday, Dec. 26
Friday, Dec. 26	Saturday, Dec. 27
Monday, Dec. 29	No Change
Tuesday, Dec. 30	No Change
Wednesday, Dec. 31	No Change
Thursday, Jan. 1	Friday, Jan. 2
Friday, Jan. 2	Saturday, Jan. 3



HOLIDAY GARBAGE EXEMPTIONS

In the week following Christmas (Dec. 26, 27, 29, 30, 31), households may place double their regular weekly garbage limit to the curb on their collection day.



CHRISTMAS TREE COLLECTION

- Saturday, Jan. 10, 2015 ONLY
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Niagara Region

Linda Blair to make heads spin at Comic Con

JOHN LAW
QMI Agency Niagara

Niagara Falls Comic Con will be possessed by Linda Blair next June.

The star of the iconic horror movie *The Exorcist* will attend all three days of the con, June 5 to 7 at the Scotiabank Convention Centre.

Blair, in just her third movie, earned an Oscar nomination for the 1973 classic, starring as young girl possessed by a demon. The film stunned audiences with its special effects and graphic content, and went on to become one of the biggest films of the '70s. When adjusted for inflation, it would still be the ninth-biggest moneymaker in movie history.

Blair reprised the role of Regan in the 1977 sequel *Exorcist II: The Heretic*,

a massive bomb considered one of the worst movies ever made. She spent the rest of the '70s and much of the '80s in B movies such as *Roller Boogie*, *Hell Night* and *Chained Heat*.

In recent years, Blair has devoted much of her time to animal rights and her non-profit organization The Linda Blair Worldheart Foundation.

Blair joins a Comic Con lineup which already includes Billy Dee Williams, Richard Hatch of *Battlestar Galactica*, Elvira, Yvonne Craig of the *Batman TV* series, horror effects legend Tom Savini, Scott Wilson of *The Walking Dead*, and WWE icon the Iron Sheik.

Tickets start at \$25, available at www.nfcomiccon.com.

john.law@sunmedia.ca

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LOCAL NEWS

■ **INFECTION CONTROL:** Niagara EMS explains why workers sometimes wear white, full-body suits

Don't panic at sight of suited-up paramedics

DOUG FRASER

QMI Agency Niagara

It appears like a scene from *The Andromeda Strain*.

Ambulance sirens ring through your neighbourhood. Ten minutes later, you peek outside to see Niagara Emergency

Medical Service paramedics suited head to toe in white personal protective equipment. Donning gowns, face masks, boots and coveralls, they trudge into a neighbour's home.

Don't be alarmed, warns EMS.

That gear is used more frequently as paramedic teams become better equipped to deal with infection control, biohazards and chemical spills. Calls to patients undergoing chemotherapy can require a full-protection response, too.

But that gown-and-suit scenario can create anxiety in some patients and bystanders, a recent Internal EMS staff survey noted.

At a media event at the EMS training centre on Ontario St., paramedics showcased the gear — ramped up according to the risk of the call — and assured people the protective situation they see may not necessarily be grave.

Increasingly, patients are choosing to take intravenous cancer treatment at home, said Niagara EMS director Kevin

BY THE NUMBERS

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— from Niagara EMS
website

Smith.

"Recently in Niagara, one of the bigger issues we have is patients receiving home chemotherapy," he said. "Medications used in home chemo are extremely dangerous when spilled or exposed."

"We need to be sure we protect ourselves, the patient and the broader community."

Smith said patients receiving home chemo can help by plac-



BOB THYMEZYSTYN, QMI AGENCY NIAGARA

Niagara EMS gave a look at the protective gear EMS workers sometimes have to use when responding to emergency calls. Paramedic Rob Law shows what full gear looks like.

ing a medication warning sign on the window. That display is provided with each home kit.

Influenza, chemotherapy and Ebola-flagged concerns require levels of full body coverage that can take 10 to 15 minutes to put on. That's to protect the patient, the paramedic and anyone else they come into contact with.

Smith said the hazard in any health-care setting is exposure to things like blood, saliva and other bodily fluids. Droplets in the air can carry infectious materials, too.

"People in the community see the responding paramedic donned in this protective equipment, and it can cause concern," Smith said. "That's in the light of outbreak situations and fear of

it creeping to Niagara. In fact ... it could be for a number of (other) reasons."

Niagara EMS training superintendent Dean Casement said it's usually only the highest level of protection that can require up to 15 minutes to suit up for.

How often do the highest-protection scenarios happen in Niagara?

"These chemotherapy calls are usually if somebody fell and broke the (IV) bottle," Casement said. "It's usually around some other medical problem."

"If it's just a spill, home care usually comes in and they are the ones that have to come in and clean it up."

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CAL NEWS

■ **LOTTO:** Three lottery winners in Niagara

Port Colborne man hits \$1M jackpot

Tribune Staff

A 26-year-old Port Colborne man is \$1 million richer after checking a two-month-old lottery ticket.

Daren Labbe won the Guaranteed \$1 Million Prize from the Oct. 18 Lotto 6/49 draw.

"I won't be going to work tomorrow," Labbe told Ontario Lottery Corp. prize centre staff while picking up his winnings recently.

He said he scanned his winning ticket and "stood in disbelief."

Labbe scanned the ticket again, and "ran out to the car and sat there," he said. "I didn't tell my girlfriend until later."

Labbe, who has been playing the lottery every week for the past two years, said he plans to pay off his house, save for his son's future and take a vacation in Las Vegas.

The winning ticket was purchased at Bridgeport Variety on Main St. in Port Colborne.

Labbe isn't the only recent winner.

A couple from Ridgeway also won the Guaranteed \$1 Million Prize, from the Dec. 10 Lotto 6/49 draw. David and Valerie King purchased the winning ticket at Avondale on Ridgeway Rd. in Crystal Beach.

And Kristina McDaniel-Powell and Jason Harbour from Niagara Falls won the Poker Lotto All In jackpot worth \$85,635.10 on Sept. 26, as well as \$5,000 on the instant portion of their Poker Lotto play and \$5 on the nightly draw, bringing their total winnings to \$90,640.10. Their win-

ning ticket was purchased at Yoo's Deli & Variety on Main St. in Niagara Falls.

Lotto 6/49 includes a Guaranteed \$1 Million Prize draw along with each and every regular draw. There have been 150 Guaranteed \$1 Million Prize draws to date. Seventy-four of the winning tickets have been sold in Ontario.

All In is a new option for Poker Lotto players, allowing to take a chance on instantly winning a jackpot that starts at \$10,000 and grows until it is won.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Port Colborne's Daren Raymond Labbe, 26, claims his \$1-million winnings at the OLG prize centre in Toronto, Friday.

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■ CITY COUNCIL

Port could waive business development charges

MARYANNE FIRTH
QMI Agency Niagara

Port Colborne could be taking an extra step in the new year to spur local development.

Following the August decision to temporarily waive residential development fees in the lakeside city, council is looking at expanding the citywide, two-year moratorium to also include commercial, industrial and institutional properties.

Council gave direction in November for a report to be created outlining the details associated with waiving the fees.

A public hearing outlining the proposed plan was held prior to last week's council meeting.

While many municipalities are waiving development charges within their community improvement plan areas, Port Colborne planning and development director Dan Aquilina said he's unaware of any that have taken on a

citywide approach.

"This is an attractive incentive for people to invest in the municipality," he said, while adding the city is hopeful it will translate into new growth and development.

Based on projected development numbers in the industrial, commercial and institutional sectors, the staff report indicated waiving development charges would mean a minimal loss of revenue.

But there's no real way to determine how much development, and in turn how much lost revenue, will occur over those two years, Aquilina said.

He estimated the two-year moratorium could result in a 0.24% tax levy increase.

"But that's a crystal ball ballpark." The report will be brought to council for consideration at the Jan. 12 meeting.

maryanne.firth@sunmedia.ca
Twitter: @mfrth1nbune

**IN
BRIEF**

YMCA branches open Sunday afternoons

YMCA of Niagara is opening its

regional branches to the public this Sunday, as it has done all this month, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Families can use special activities such as family swim, bouncer, tumbling mats, sports and an obstacle course.

Photo ID is required, and adults are required to participate with children. YMCA aquatic admission criteria also applies.

For more information, visit ymcaofniagara.org.

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honey sauce

OR

3 Fresh Oysters served with Tobasco
and fresh lemon

OR

Fresh Jumbo Boston Scallops puff
pastry served with a pomegranate
cream sauce;
on a bed of spinach and blood
orange segments

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Pheasant Breast stuffed with
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LOCAL NEWS

Fascinating poinsettia facts you may not know

TERESA FORTE
Special to QMI Agency Niagara

Poinsettias are the quintessential Christmas flower. I've scoured my resources for some interesting facts and folklore about this traditional Christmas plant. Pour yourself a cup of coffee, put up your feet and enjoy...

■ **Poinsettias** (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), belong to the spurge family. Many plants in this family ooze a milky sap that can irritate the skin of some people. As a precaution, it is best to keep poinsettias away from curious puppies and kittens.

■ The showy coloured parts of poinsettias that most people think of as the flowers are actually coloured bracts. The tiny yellow flowers are in the centre of the colourful bracts. The plant drops its bracts and leaves soon after those flowers shed their pollen. For the longest-lasting poinsettias, choose plants with little or no yellow pollen showing.

■ The poinsettia is named for Joel Roberts Poinsett, a botanist, physician and the first United States Ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett sent cuttings of the plant to his home in Charleston, S.C., in 1828.

■ The poinsettia has many

colourful names. The plant is known as 'La Flor de la Nochebuena' (Flower of the Holy Night, or Christmas Eve) in Mexico where they flower in the winter. In Chile and Peru, the poinsettia is called the 'Crown of the Andes'.

■ Native to Central America, and particularly southern Mexico, the poinsettia is a perennial shrub that will grow up to 3 to 4 metres tall. They are not frost tolerant.

■ The Aztecs used the bracts of the poinsettia to make a reddish purple dye for fabrics, and used the sap (actually latex) medicinally to control fevers.

■ Poinsettia plants are less toxic than once believed, according to the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org). The sap from the plant can cause a mild, itchy rash. Wash the affected area with soap and water. If parts of plant are ingested, you may suffer a stomach ache, vomiting or diarrhea. The plant is not tasty. If you find a child eating the leaves, clear and rinse his or her mouth with water. A study at Ohio State University showed that a 22.5-kilogram child would have to eat more than a pound-and-a-quarter of poinsettia leaves (500-600 leaves) to have any side effects.

■ A 16th-century Mexican legend describes a girl who



TERESA H. FORTE/SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY NIAGARA

Look closely — tiny yellow poinsettia flowers are clustered in the centre of their showy bracts.

was too poor to provide an offering for the baby Jesus on Christmas Eve at her church. An angel suggested that the simplest gift, offered with a sincere heart, would be suitable. The girl collected wild plants and humbly placed them on the altar. Red flowers blossomed from the weeds —

beautiful poinsettias.

■ Since the 17th century, Franciscan friars in Mexico have decorated their churches with poinsettias for Christmas.

■ At home, place poinsettias away from cold drafts or hot air registers. A cool bright location is ideal. Water the

plants sparingly. They will need a moderate amount of water once or twice a week.

■ There are over 100 varieties of poinsettias available in shades of red, pink, white, yellow, purple, salmon, and multi-colours. Surprisingly, 4.5 million poinsettia plants are grown in Ontario each

year.

■ ■ ■
"The Vineland Research and Innovation Centre is the site of international poinsettia trials," said its CEO, Jim Brande. "Growers come out now to view the poinsettia trials in order to determine which ones they offer for sale next year."

The trials are carried out on behalf of four poinsettia breeders to understand the performance the myriad of varieties under different climate conditions. California is different from Ontario in November, for example," said Brande. "There are 20 to 25 new varieties in trial this year including Orange Spice, Ice Plant, Merry Christmas and Premium Picasso Punch."

The Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, 4690 Victoria Ave. N., welcomes the public to their annual Poinsettia Open House on Friday from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Come out and see the more than 100 varieties of poinsettias on display and to vote for your favourites. Please bring a non-perishable donation for the local food bank. (Visit: www.vinelandresearch.com for details.)

Teresa Forte is a local garden writer, photographer and speaker. You can reach her by calling 905-351-7540 or by e-mail at teresa_forte@sympatico.ca.

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